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FM AMEMBASSY ABUJA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6888
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS 4875
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002198

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/17/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [NI](#) [ELECTIONS](#)
SUBJECT: IWU SAYS THAT ELECTIONS ARE ON TRACK

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN CAMPBELL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

1.(U) Summary: Ambassador, Acting USAID Mission Director, Acting Political Counselor, and USAID Democracy and Governance Officer met with Professor Maurice Iwu, Chairman of Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) on August 17. Iwu told the group that &in every way, INEC is better prepared now than they were in 2002.8 He asserted that INEC has sufficient funds and has shared its procurement plans with the President and National Assembly. Iwu outlined INEC's ambitious plans for nationwide voter registration using handheld computers. He said that INEC will announce the election timetable soon and will begin wide-scale voter education in January. End Summary.

Election Prep is "On Track"

¶2. (U) Chairman Iwu told the Ambassador that he had just briefed the National Assembly on preparations for the 2007 elections. He asserted that &in every way, INEC is better prepared now than they were in 2002.8 Iwu also said he shared a detailed procurement plan with the National Assembly. He noted that one positive change has been the opening of the political space through the registration of new parties. (There are now over forty parties registered with INEC.) He said that this opening has reduced intraparty acrimony because it is relatively easy to decamp to a new party if you have a disagreement.

¶3. (U) Iwu said that the National Assembly has given INEC sufficient funds to conduct a good election in 2007. He explained that on August 17 the Finance Ministry released 20 billion naira to INEC's accounts, giving INEC access to about 90% of its allocated budget. Iwu also told us that he had petitioned the President to overcome the problems INEC has been encountering with the slowness of the Due Process office. They have now been promised that they will get a Due Process certificate within 7 days of submitting the appropriate paperwork.

Voter Registration

¶4. (U) According to Chairman Iwu, INEC plans to start voter registration in late September or early October. Iwu claimed that registration will only take 10 days nation-wide. He said that INEC discovered so many problems with the 2003 voters roll that they couldn't simply revalidate it as they had planned. They instead decided to shift to a direct data capture mechanism and conduct wholesale nationwide re-registration.

15. (U) Voters must register at their designated polling places. Registration will take place using small, handheld, battery-operated computers, "almost like what the police use when they give you a ticket on the highway.8 The machines will capture the voter's identifying data and photo. Those who register will eventually receive a voter identification card, which Iwu compared to a MasterCard or Visa. At the time of registration, a voter will receive a printed, bar-coded receipt which he can use as identification in case his permanent card has not been distributed before the election. Iwu said that after registration, there is no processing time needed to create the voters roll. The information is simply transferred from the handheld devices to a central database.

16. (U) Iwu said that on election day, a machine will scan each voter's identification card. After checking in, the voter will receive a paper ballot and cast his vote. At the close of the election, the paper ballots will be counted at the polling station and the results will be certified by the presiding officer and polling agents for each party. The results will then be transmitted both to the state headquarters and to Abuja. Iwu was hopeful that the process of counting and certifying the vote total at the polling place would reduce fraud.

17. (U) Iwu admitted that the voter registration machines are not yet in stock. He said that the machines are being supplied by several overseas companies. Iwu said that INEC has demanded 50 advance copies of the handheld computers to be used for training while the rest of the machines are being produced. He was confident that the machines would be received in time for registration to begin in about six weeks. (Note: Iwu did not say whether or not the 50

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demonstration models have already been received. End Note.)

Timetable, Voter Education

18. (U) INEC has not yet announced the detailed election timetable (the actual sequence of the polls) because Iwu first wants to hold a series of stakeholders meetings. He will announce the detailed schedule after consulting with the parties, the National Assembly, and having a national public forum on August 29. Chairman Iwu said that voter education has already started, but in a &sluggish8 manner. Its current emphasis is on broad issues. Iwu predicted that the voter education effort will discuss specifics related to the polls much later. He anticipated a "get out the vote" campaign in January 2007. Iwu was concerned about voter education initiatives inadvertently aiding fraud. For example, if INEC started to publicize sample ballots too soon, it might inspire some politicians to produce counterfeits.

Areas for Improvement

19. (U) Iwu identified several key areas for INEC to work on as Nigeria prepares for the 2007 polls. First and foremost, he said INEC will be working on the &operational issues8 to be sure that all the logistics were in place for Nigeria to have free and fair elections. The second area Iwu identified was the &election environment.8 He pointed to violence during and around elections as well as gender issues. Third, Iwu talked about money and politics. He said that some candidates are already stockpiling funds for 2007 and that some good people are intimidated by a lack of funds and don't run. INEC wants to try to level the playing field through regulation of campaign finance. Iwu acknowledged the help of IFES in producing a manual on party finance issues.

The final area for improvement ahead of the 2007 polls, per Iwu, is that of the mindset of the electorate. Iwu said that Nigerians were under military rule for so long that even after seven years some "military hangover" remains. Iwu noted that he could use help from the donor community on voter education and the establishment of several "electoral institutes" to professionalize the training of election workers in Nigeria.

Comment

¶10. (C) What we had hoped would be a frank discussion with Maurice Iwu about Nigeria's election preparations turned into a formal protocol visit, complete with press coverage. The Ambassador used the occasion to reiterate our public message that Nigeria's coming elections are of critical importance and that America stands ready to help make them a success.

¶11. (C) INEC paints too rosy a picture about its readiness to conduct a credible election in April 2007. The Mission remains concerned that the machines needed for voter registration are not in country and we are skeptical that they can be deployed in just six weeks time. The longer Nigeria delays announcing the timetable and conducting voter registration, the more the public doubts INEC's willingness and ability to conduct free and fair polls.

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